

Electoral Services Update

Date: 16 September 2024

Report of: Director of Communities, Housing and Environment

Report to: Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

What is this report about?

Including how it contributes to the City's and council's ambitions

- To update and inform the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board on:
 - The elections in May and July 2024
 - Postal voting reapplication exercise

- The information in this report is for information only, no proposals are being made.

Recommendations

- a) Members of Scrutiny Board should note the content of the report.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

- 1 This report is for information only. No proposals are being made.
- 2 A request was made for a report to inform on the elections held in May and July 2024, and to provide an overview of the exercise for existing absent voters to reapply under rules introduced by the Elections Act 2022.

3 2024 Elections

- 3.1 Local and West Yorkshire Combined Authority elections were held on Thursday 2 May 2024.
- 3.2 A UK Parliamentary General Election was held on Thursday 4 July 2024.

Postal voting

- 3.3 Leeds continues to have the largest number of electors registered for postal votes in a single local authority in England.
- 3.4 The table below shows the number of postal voters in Leeds on both election dates, the percentage of the electorate this represents, and how many postal votes were returned.

Election date	Overall electorate	Total PVs issued	% of electorate	Total PVs returned	% returned
02-May	577817	170628	29.53%	110133	64.55%
04-Jul	491176	150604	30.66%	118086	78.41%

- 3.5 Some returned postal votes were rejected by the (Acting) Returning Officer in accordance with regulations. Rejection typically occurs when a postal vote is returned without the ballot paper or security statement and where the date of birth and/or signature is incorrect, missing, or unreadable.
- 3.6 The number of rejected postal votes at the elections in 2024 in comparison to previous years is shown below.

Postal Votes	2021	2022	2023	May-24	Jul-24
Total Issued	204779	186367	177807	170628	150604
Total Rejected	4705	2569	2770	3183	2493
Total PVs returned	146142	121912	107356	110133	118086
% PVs returned	71.37%	65.41%	60.37%	64.55%	78.41%
% of PVs rejected from the overall number returned	3.22%	2.11%	2.60%	2.89%	2.11%
% of PVs rejected from the overall number issued	2.30%	1.38%	1.56%	1.87%	1.66%
Average number of PVs rejected in a ward	143	78	84	96	86

- 3.7 A table showing the number of rejected postal votes by ward for the May 2024 elections and previous years is attached at Appendix A. This information is not available by ward for the UK Parliamentary General Election which was held on a constituency basis.
- 3.8 Postal vote rejection rates slightly increased in May 2024, but this can be attributed to the combination of polls and a higher than usual number of electors sending their documents back separately, some of which were not received by the Returning Officer until after polling day and could not therefore be counted.

- 3.9 The instructions for return of the documents were clear, for example the ballot paper envelope contained large print text informing the elector to place the green and yellow ballot papers in the envelope.
- 3.10 We will review the postal vote pack ahead of further combined elections to see how we can better support electors in their understanding of how to complete and return their ballot papers and postal voting statement.
- 3.11 A further reduction in rejection rates is anticipated when new signatures are obtained from electors under the changes to absent voting applications mentioned in 4. below.

Method of voting

- 3.12 The higher number of registered postal voters means more electors vote by post in the Leeds City Council area than at a polling station at local elections. This has been the case since the Covid elections in 2021. The table below shows how voter behaviour has changed in this respect over the past 8 years.
- 3.13 This trend was not repeated on the UK Parliamentary General Election polling day when polling station was the most popular method of voting since 2019.

Year	Type	By post	In person
2018	LCC (all out)	33.44%	66.56%
2019	LCC & Parish	34.04%	65.96%
2020	No elections	--	--
2021	LCC & Mayoral	63.75%	36.25%
2022	LCC	62.27%	37.73%
2023	LCC & Parish	58.19%	41.81%
May-24	LCC & Mayoral	55.64%	44.36%
Jul-24	UKPGE	42.48%	57.52%

Turnout

- 3.14 The overall turnout on 2 May 2024 elections was 34.24%. This was an increase of 2.75% compared to the May 2023 elections which saw a turnout of 31.49%
- 3.15 The overall turnout for Leeds on 4 July 2024 was 56.6%. This was a decrease of 9.16% compared to the December 2019 UK Parliamentary General Elections where the turnout for Leeds was 65.76%.

Voter ID

- 3.16 In total, 87,789 electors voted in a polling station in Leeds on 2 May 2024. Of that number, 513 electors were initially refused a ballot paper either because they had no ID or had brought ID that was not on the approved list.
- 3.17 Of the 513 initially refused, 353 returned to the polling station with approved ID and were issued with a ballot paper.
- 3.18 This meant 160 electors applied for a ballot paper in a polling station and were not able to vote, 0.18% of the overall number of electors who attended a polling station.
- 3.19 A breakdown of this number by ward and a comparison to the elections in May 2023 can be found at Appendix B.
- 3.20 On 4 July 2024, 159,902 electors voted in a polling station. Of that number, 349 electors were initially refused a ballot paper for the reasons set out in 3.16 above.
- 3.21 Of the 349 initially refused, 261 returned to the polling station with approved ID and were issued with a ballot paper.

- 3.22 This meant 88 electors applied for a ballot paper in a polling station for the UK Parliamentary General Election and were not able to vote. This is 0.05% of the overall number of electors who attended a polling station.
- 3.23 We are pleased with the reduction in the number of electors unable to vote because of voter ID at both elections, particularly those areas where numbers were higher in 2023, which can be seen at Appendix B.
- 3.24 This demonstrates our ongoing extensive campaign to promote the requirement to show an accepted form of ID, with targeted comms in areas with higher numbers of refusals, has been successful.
- 3.25 We will continue to use the data collected to identify areas where more support is required and put measures in place to further reduce numbers of electors unable to vote.

4 Requirement for postal voters to reapply

- 4.1 An online absent vote application service was introduced on 31 October 2023 to allow electors to apply for a postal or proxy vote online.
- 4.2 Identity checking is now in place for all new absent vote applications, except for emergency proxy arrangements.
- 4.3 The identity checking requirements mirror those for registration applications; an elector must provide their National Insurance Number (NINo) during the application process or give a reason if this cannot be provided. Like the register to vote process, there will be an exceptions process in place.
- 4.4 The Elections Act 2022 introduced a restriction on the maximum time a person can hold their absent vote for.
- 4.5 For postal voters, this means their postal vote entitlement will now end on the third 31 January after their postal vote was granted. Put simply, a postal voting arrangement will last for a maximum of 3 years only.
- 4.6 We are currently in a transitional period for those electors with existing postal voters whose arrangements were in place before the commencement of the new measures on 31 October 2023.
- 4.7 These electors, around 165,000 in total, will be required to complete a new application, either online or on paper, under the new system.
- 4.8 Existing postal voters will continue to be able to vote by post for relevant polls until the third 31 January following the commencement of the new measures. This is 31 January 2026.
- 4.9 The Electoral Registration Officer will write to these postal voters during the fallow year in 2025, informing them they are required to make a fresh application, and that they will then need to do this every 3 years.
- 4.10 Notifications will be sent to electors ahead of their postal vote being due to expire going forward.
- 4.11 The reapplication process will involve email and postal communications. All postal voters for whom the Electoral Registration Officer holds an email address will be encouraged to do this online initially.
- 4.12 Anyone who has not applied under the new rules by 31 January 2026 will have their postal vote facility cancelled. They will be notified of cancellation, and provided with details informing them how to reapply should they wish to do so.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards Affected:

Have ward members been consulted? Yes No

- 5 The changes to the absent voting application process will impact all applicants from the date of implementation, and all existing postal voters who must reapply under the new system by the end of January 2026.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

- 6 This report is for information only. No local consultation has taken place.

What are the resource implications?

- 7 The postal voting reapplication process can be managed within core Electoral Services Team.
- 8 Funding will be available from DLUHC by way of both up front grants and justification led bids to cover the costs of this process.

What are the legal implications?

- 9 Not applicable - no proposal is being made currently.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

- 10 Not applicable - no proposal is being made currently.

Does this proposal support the council's 3 Key Pillars?

Inclusive Growth Health and Wellbeing Climate Emergency

- 11 Not applicable - no proposal is being made currently.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

- 12 Not applicable.

b) How will success be measured?

- 13 Not applicable.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

- 14 Not applicable.

Appendices

- 15 Appendix A – Postal Voting Statistics

Background papers

16 None.